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CIA's Colby Makes Way For Bush

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William E. Colby walked the last few steps to his dusty Buick Skylark for his final drive home from CIA headquarters, leaving behind his successor, George Bush, and the President of the United States.

There was a rising gust of applause as the crowd of colleagues, some of them wet-eyed, realized that Colby had detached himself from the transitional spectacle for his solitary departure yesterday — a victim of changing public attitudes and the revelations that he himself had set in motion.

The car, with Colby at the wheel, moved slowly away from the guards and the applause as President Ford and Bush shook hands and pressed flesh as though the big white building surrounded by miles of chain link fence were a suburban supermarket at campaign time.

It was an ending that would have done justice to George Smiley, the anti-hero of spy novelist John Le. Carre — understated and not without its ironies.

The ceremony yesterday at Langley was an unprecedented act of national political pageantry that paid homage to the three branches of government. Not only was the President there, but the oath of office for the new director of central intelligence was administered by Associate Justice Potter Stewart, and a sprinkling of members of Congress were in attendance. It was conducted in the Year 2001-like bubble-top amphitheater adjoining the main CIA building.

President Ford sounded the theme of the day when he

proclaimed, in a paraphrase of a quotation from the Vietnam war era, "... One thing is very, very certain — we cannot improve this agency by destroying it." In Vietnam a U.S. military officer once explained that his troops had "... to destroy the village (of Bentre) to save it."

Yet it was Colby who more than two years ago began the sweeping investigation, at the order of then-Director James R. Schlesinger, of CIA excesses that became the subject of press revelations and congressional inquiries provoking the gravest crisis of the agency's 29-year history. The CIA-compiled list of abuses, described at Langley as "the family jewels," leaked out.

Colby was not only the chief instrument of internal disclosure but, then, almost inevitably, became the political butt of the intelligence scandals. He had to go. Last Nov. 3 President Ford announced that Colby was being fired and replaced by Bush, U.S. envoy to Peking and former Republican national chairman.

It was clearly the President's hope that the transition from Colby, the intelligence professional, to Bush, the amiable man of politics, marked the end of the agency's dark passage through controversy into a new era of public legitimacy.

"The United States must have a strong and effective capability to gather, to evaluate foreign intelligence and carry out necessary covert operations," President Ford told the CIA audience.

"Secondly, these activities must be conducted in a constitutional and lawful manner and never be aimed at our own citizens."

He told his intelligence constituency that he had "no intention of seeing the intelligence community dismantled, its operations paralyzed or its effectiveness undermined." The President assured them, as did Bush, that he would act to protect intelligence officers from public exposure.

The balance would be redressed, Mr. Ford promised, between the "public's right to know" and the intelligence community's "right to live in peace."

The issue of security for American intelligence officials was injected into the CIA controversy with the assassination in Athens on Dec. 23 of the agency's chief of station in Greece, Richard S. Welch.

A month prior to the fatal shooting by a still-unidentified gang the name and address of Welch and other embassy officials had been printed in the English-language Athens Daily News.

A year earlier Welch's name was published in Counter-Spy, the publication of a Washington-based intelligence muckraking group called Fifth Estate. He was identified then as chief of station in Lima, Peru, his previous post. Counter-Spy also listed his predecessor in Athens.

Colby recently said in an interview that Welch's tragic murder marked an important turning point in American public opinion on the CIA, reinforced by heavy official attention to the assassination.

President Ford's appearance at Langley followed his first major success on

Capitol Hill in preventing publication of intelligence community irregularities.

The House by a vote of 246 to 124 on Thursday ordered the intelligence committee, headed by New York Democrat Otis Pike, to obtain presidential approval to release its report publicly. Pike had tentatively planned to make public the report and its store of already leaked secrets at noon yesterday.

Pike angrily left Washington after the vote. His name appeared on the list of officials invited to the swearing-in yesterday of Bush. His counterpart in the Senate, Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) of the Senate intelligence committee was not included among the invitees.

Church successfully defied both the President and Colby last November to make public a staff report on CIA complicity in assassination plots aimed at foreign leaders. The final report of the Senate committee is yet to be issued.

The circumstances of publication of that report could be the first political skirmish of George Bush, former congressman and Republican activist, in the next round of intelligence controversies.

Colby, meanwhile, will be taking a one year interlude to write a book on the craft of intelligence before beginning to practice law in Washington.